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ABSTRACT

Research on social influence in counseling has examined how clients perceive counselors and how counselors influence clients. There has been little attention to counselors' perception of clients or the ways clients influence counselors. Research in this area could identify client characteristics which contribute to the counseling process and could enable practitioners to train clients for counseling. This paper reviews related research, citing studies examining the effect on counselors of: clients trained in interviewing skills; counselors and clients matched for level of conceptual thinking; client attractiveness; client motivation; and clients trained in problem solving or job interviewing skills. Pre-training for clients based on research on client characteristics is suggested to enhance the reciprocal influence process of the counseling relationship. (MCF)

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Training Clients for Counseling:

A Social Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

The emphasis in social influence research has been on the examination of how clients perceive counselors. Clients, however, possess certain characteristics that can contribute positively to the counseling relationship. Future research efforts should be directed toward the identification of these characteristics. In turn, practitioners should provide training to clients in these areas to enhance the likelihood of positive outcome in counseling.

Training Clients for Counseling:

A Social Psychological Perspective

The emphasis in social influence research as it relates to counseling has been on how clients perceive counselors. Most notably, efforts have been made to assess the degree to which clients perceive counselors as expert, trustworthy, and attractive (Corrigan, Dell, Lewis & Schmidt, 1980; Heppner & Dixon, 1981). In addition, counseling researchers have also been examining the degree to which counselors are able to influence clients as a result of these perceptions.

It is tantamount, however, that counseling researchers begin to make more of an effort toward considering how counselors perceive clients. The social influence process is a two way exchange and as much as counselors are attempting to influence clients, clients are also attempting to influence counselors (Strong, 1982). The examination of the social influence process from this perspective will provide researchers with an opportunity to identify those characteristics that the client possesses which contribute positively to the counseling relationship. In addition, the discovery of these characteristics will enable practitioners to provide training to clients prior to counseling. Efforts of these kind should enhance the process of counseling.

Related Research

There are only a handful of studies in the recent counseling psychology literature which have addressed counselor perceptions of clients and how they might be enhanced through training. Still, the results of these studies do provide enough preliminary support for the hypothesis that counselor perceptions can positively or negatively affect the counseling relationship. In fact, some of these studies

readily acknowledge in their methodology that specific client behaviors leave counselors with an unfavorable impression. Thus, they seek out clients who exhibit these behaviors for inclusion in their studies and then provide them with training which might generate more favorable impressions from a counselor.

For example, Jennings and Davis (1977) noted in the introduction to their study that the counselor's most preferred client has been identified as YAVIS (Schofield, 1964). A YAVIS client is an individual who is young, attractive, verbal, intelligent, and successful. Therefore, they selected non-YAVIS type clients to be subjects in their study and provided them with skills training in behaviors that are perceived as being positive for counseling.

The subjects were emotionally disturbed adolescents in a residential mental health institute. They received nonpsychotic diagnosis and had been hospitalized anywhere from 1 to 6 months. They received specific training in the verbal behaviors of interview initiation, interview responsibility, interview elaboration, and affective expression.

The results of the study indicated that when the experimental and control group were compared on the four skills, the experimental group was superior in the demonstration of the behaviors of interview initiation and interview responsibility. The subjects did not differ, however, on the skills of interview elaboration and affective expression. The authors noted, however, that the latter two skills were far more complex than the former and the difficulty in acquiring these two skills may have been the reason for the lack of differences between the two groups. These authors also considered the effects that the acquisition of these skills would have upon whether the counselors perceived the clients as attractive. This comparison did not prove

to be significant. The researchers suggested that this may have been due to the fact that the counselors and clients already had a long term relationship established prior to this study. It would be unreasonable, therefore, to expect that the acquisition of two interview skills by a client would significantly alter a counselor's perceptions.

Several studies in social psychology have established that similarity can generate attraction. Therefore, Davis, Cook, Jennings, & Heck (1977) explored the possibility that counselor-client similarity might enhance the counselor's perceptions of the client. The variable under consideration in this study was conceptual level. Conceptual level refers to the method "that individuals use for receiving, storing, and processing interpersonal stimuli. Conceptual level varies from a concrete system such that the individual processes interpersonal stimuli in a unidimensional and unintegrated way to a highly abstract system that uses and combines a number of dimensions in processing information" (p. 474). (It is important to note here that YAVIS clients have a higher conceptual level than non-YAVIS clients since conceptual level correlates with socioeconomic status.)

Master's level counselors in training were matched with clients to test this similarity hypothesis. Their conceptual levels were assessed and they were then provided with packets of material that described a particular client. In one packet the client was described as having a concrete level of conceptual thinking while the other packet described the client as having an abstract level of conceptual thinking.

An analysis of the data gathered in this study revealed an unexpected finding. Both groups of counselors, those identified as having either a high or low level of conceptual thinking, found the high level conceptual thinking client to be more attractive.

Lewis, Davis, Walker & Jennings (1981) were also interested in how counselors react to attractive clients. To determine this, they developed audio tapes with an individual portraying either an attractive or an unattractive client. The attractive role consisted of behaviors such as: initiation of the interview, responsibility for some direction of the interview, and high affective expression during the interview. On the unattractive tape, the client exhibited low levels of these behaviors. The physical appearance, either attractive or unattractive, was portrayed through photographs.

The subjects in the study were to imagine that they were a counselor and after having listened to a tape they completed a questionnaire which addressed the degree to which they felt attracted toward the client.

The results of this study did indicate that counselors perceptions of clients elevate when the client exhibits attractive behaviors during the counseling interview. The results of this study did not support the hypothesis that counselors would be more attractive to a client due to the physical appearance of the client.

In summarizing their findings, Lewis et al., (1981) pointed out that clients as well as counselors are more likely to be perceived as attractive due to specific behaviors rather than as a result of physical appearance. They make an excellent point in noting, however, that when it comes to positive or negative client behaviors everything is left to chance. While "most counseling approaches require that the client take an active role in the counseling process (these same approaches) do not specify how the client is to learn those behaviors which he is held theoretically responsible" (p. 313). Furthermore, when a physically unattractive counselor is considered, it is important to remember that he or she has received extensive training in self-

presentation and impression formation and uses this training to enhance client perceptions. Therefore, it seems purposeless to train only one member of the counseling dyad.

A study conducted in an actual counseling setting by Heppner and Heesacker (1982) illustrates very well the impact that training could have upon counseling outcome. The subjects in the study were counselor-client dyads in a university counseling center that met for at least seven sessions. Prior to the first session, the clients completed the Expectations about Counseling (Tinsley, Workman, & Cass, 1980) questionnaire in an effort toward assessing their level of motivation. After the first session ended, clients were asked to complete the Counselor Rating Form (Barak & LaCrosse, 1975) and the counselor's were asked to complete the Counselor's Perception questionnaire, which had been developed by the authors. These two questionnaires were completed again after the final counseling session as well.

In summary, the results of this study indicated that significant differences between high and low motivated clients could be linked to the quality of counselor attractiveness. Clients with a high degree of motivation perceived their counselor as more attractive than did those clients with a low degree of motivation. In turn, those counselors who were rated as highly attractive were the same counselors who perceived themselves to be highly capable of influencing their clients. The conclusion drawn by one individual (Dorn, 1983), who reviewed this study for another publication, was that the quality of client motivation increased counselor perceptions of the client as an attractive individual.

This perception of the client as an attractive individual by the counselor was then reciprocated by the client which in turn enhanced the counselor's social power. In this particular study then, increased client motivation resulted in increased social power. The issue for counseling researchers to pursue then is the identification of those particular client characteristics that contriubte to the client's level of motivation for counseling.

Forsyth and Forsyth (1983) demonstrated that client motivation for counseling could be increased by convincing the client that he or she had control over his or her circumstances. This finding supports the hypothesis proposed by Strong (1982) which suggests that the counselor's goal during the interpersonal influence process of counseling is to encourage the client to reattribute his or her difficulties to factors over which he or she has control.

It is my contention that this process is one of socialization which can be achieved through actual training prior to counseling. This has been demonstrated recently by two authors who utilized videotape packages on clients prior to counseling. Friedlander and Kaul (1983) used a role induction procedure on clients while Wilson (1985) provided clients with information about psychotherapy and a model of a client participating in psychotherapy. Results of both studies support the use of pre-training prior to counseling.

Finally, two studies recently appeared in the literature which when they are considered jointly in the context of training clients offer additional support for the effort. The first study conducted by Wild and

and Kerr (1984) is a creative reversal of the standard effort that has been made with social influence theory as it relates to counseling. The training program they developed and implemented was for high school students in the area of job interviewing skills. Operating from the assumption that counselors can and are trained in persuasion skills (Kerr, Claiborn, and Dixon, 1982) these authors taught the subjects in their study specific behaviors which would enhance employers perceptions of them.

Subjects in this study were divided into two groups. The control group was taught concepts about transactional analysis, while the experimental group was taught concepts from social influence theory. In addition, they were introduced to specific behaviors associated with the three dimensions of expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.

After the training sessions were completed each subject in both groups was interviewed for a hypothetical job at a summer camp by adults who were unknown to the subjects. Subject behavior during the interview was assessed with a version of the Counselor Rating Form (Barak & LaCrosse, 1977). Results of this study demonstrated that those subjects trained in persuasion skills were perceived as being far more persuasive than those individuals in the control group.

The Larson and Heppner(1985) study, while it did not directly address the concept of training clients, does have implications for training. In that particular study the researchers examined the relationship between career decisiveness and an individual's perception of themselves as a good problem solver. The results of their investigation

revealed that "self-perceived positive problem solvers reported more certainity about their decision making ability and occupational potential, expressed fewer feelings of external control related to their indecisiveness, and perceived a greater relationship between their ability and occupational choice. Moreover, they endorsed fewer antecedents of career indecision than did the self perceived negative problem solver" (p. 62).

The authors of this study are quick to note, however, that their results should be interpreted cautiously. Still, they offer an opportunity for counseling researchers to speculate on the possibility of training vocationally concerned clients in problem solving skills. These results also provide counseling practitioners and researchers with the opportunity to speculate about additional skills or attributes which clients could be provided with so that they make a greater contribution to counseling outcome.

Summary

It is paramount that counseling researchers focus more attention on those factors that clients bring to counseling. For far too long, counseling researchers interested in the social influence model have failed to consider those client variables that enhance as well as mediate the counselor's efforts. The study conducted by Heppner and Heesacker (1982) clearly suggested that a receiprocal influence process between counselor and client had developed. Our task now is to discover those characteristics that clients possess which generate this receiprocal process and initiate pre-training efforts for those who do not intially

possess these skills. These efforts should enhance our understanding of the social influence process.

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